

BACAN *DUKUN* AND *MATAKAU*

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Introduction

In 1993 while on an exploratory research trip to the island of Bacan in the Malukan archipelago, I conducted interviews with two *dukun* (traditional healer-exorciser-soothsayer) regarding their practice and the concept of *matakau* ‘charms’. One was an elderly Protestant man (Pak “A”) who had originally gained his knowledge in a self-healing process that occurred, according to him, during an altered state of consciousness. The other was a young Moslem man (Mas “Y”) who had learned his art from his father, who in turn had the knowledge passed down to him from his father. As divergent as their situations may initially appear, their roles, functions, and status are similar and touch on some themes in Malukan studies: (1) the traditional concepts of power and the social function of magic; (2) the syncretism of traditional beliefs with orthodox religion; (3) the persistence of a regional cultural identity; and (4) the relationship between ritual practice, world view and the social order.

The purpose of this study is to share the information attained during my preliminary investigation and to stimulate more in-depth research on particular topics relating to *dukun* and the Bacanese islands.

Bacan Island and the town of Labuha

Located off the southwest tip of Halmahera, the group of 80 islands comprising the Bacan subdistrict have a combined population of about 56,099 (1991 census). Bacan Island, the largest of this group, has the principal town of the area, Labuha. Labuha is centrally located on the western shore of Bacan Island. Its population in 1991 was about 2055, apart from the minority Chinese who are accounted for in a separate census. The town has two distinct commercial areas: the western-style commercial area with banks, hotels, shops, and marine operations, and the traditional open-air market at the beach. Near the center of town is a Protestant church. Less than a mile from the church, in the northwest part of town, are 3 mosques

located within a quarter of a mile of each other in a mostly Moslem residential section called Amasing.

Dukun are a localized, indigenous source of health care who are reliable, accessible, and culturally familiar. The government's official recognition of *dukun* under the category of health personnel (*tenaga kesehatan*) is an indication that *dukun* provide medical cures and treatment among other various functions. That *dukun* far outnumber other health care personnel indicates that they are addressing a widespread need and are popularly viewed as a source of help. Alternative health solutions, such as the medical clinic and its personnel, are few in number, offer limited services, and may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable to some people.

My interest in *dukun* began with a curiosity about *matakau* 'charms, hexed warning objects'. While wandering about the outskirts of Labuha, I came across a well-ordered coconut grove that had a small (about 2 ft. high, 2½ ft. long, 2 ft. wide) bamboo and thatched roof shelter under which hung a bottle tied with a red strip of cloth and filled part way with a clear liquid. (See Figure 1, p. 68.) The construction was visibly erected in the center of the grove. I was told that the bottle was a *matakau* to protect the grove and to warn people that the coconuts were not for public picking. On an underdeveloped island like Bacan, where there are many open areas with no demarcating boundaries, the presence of a *matakau* serves to alert passersby that a grove or area is restricted to people who have rights to its use.

Matakau are made by *dukun*, whose knowledge of magic and manipulation of religious texts make the *matakau* effective. In addition to making *matakau*, *dukun* also functioned as traditional healers and psychics who felt called to help others. When asked about *matakau*, the people in Labuha expressed familiarity, respect, and fear of the object itself. They recognized the power and importance of God and the Bible or Koran in the ability of the *matakau* to protect, guard, and inflict punishment. The punishing curse of the *matakau* could take the form of scabies, blindness, sickness, and death. Though it could be used for either good or bad, people believed that *matakau* was primarily for the protection of property. Opinions varied as to what it was used to guard: some said that it protected fruits and coconuts, but not sago, while others said it did protect sago.

Overall, my impressions and inferences based on observations were that people regularly visited *dukun* to solve problems, that there were different types of *matakau*, that *matakau* was commonly used, that the police did not like people who made *matakau*, and that most people preferred not to resort

to the police or other government agencies to solve their problems (preferring *dukun* instead).

Mas Y

The first *dukun* I interviewed was a young Moslem man who was living in the northwest area of Labuha. Though only 20 years old at the time, Mas Y enjoyed a reputation for being a knowledgeable and effective healer. A tall, slender man with bright eyes and a ready smile, Mas exhibited a quiet confidence and charismatic presence. He was originally from Kampung Gunedidalem, a village on the southern tip of Halmahera across from east Bacan. As the eldest son, Mas received instruction from his father on the mystical spells and art of physical healing when he reached the age of 18. Typically handed down generation after generation from father to first-born son, this knowledge can also be transmitted to either the eldest or youngest daughter if all the children are girls. The decision as to which daughter would be chosen is delivered to the father in a dream. The first of Mas's family to possess this special knowledge acquired it through a mystical revelation. Mas is a good *dukun*, as opposed to a *doti-doti* or bad *dukun* who is said to make people crazy.

Mas's medical treatments ranged from making magic water (made by saying a *mantera* 'magic formula') for the patient to drink, to repairing broken bones, to doing therapeutic massages with coconut oil prepared with lemon peel, over which powerful *mantera* were said. If a person had cuts, Mas could stop the bleeding, but he did not have medications: a doctor would still be required for that. The same *mantera* were used whether it was to treat headaches, stomach ailments, or broken bones. His reputation as a healer was very high in the community, as attested by his friends and school teacher. To find out if the *dukun*'s role conflicted with that of the established religion, I asked Mas if the *imam* 'mosque prayer leader' knew of Mas's talents and if the *imam* would suggest Mas's services when someone needed help. Both Mas and his friend nodded emphatically, saying that the *imam* knew Mas was a *dukun* and had asked him to help people who fall ill or fall victim to crime. Mas's power is effective and available for anyone, whether it be Moslem or Christian. He does not charge for his services because he believes it to be his calling to help others.

Mantera are secret spells taught to Mas by his father. These include sayings from the Koran. An ordinary person knowing and repeating the *mantera* would not have the same affect. Mas's father gave him special knowledge of how to use the *mantera* and how to make *matakau*. It was

implied that the young man also had an inner power and strength that developed from his training and that he was considered by others to be a brave person. *Mantera* are the personal power tools of a *dukun*. Any props or materials, such as water, oil, or other objects, are imbued with a magical power by spells that are known only to the *dukun*.

In addition to offering medical aid, Mas and his knowledge also provide assistance to crime victims seeking the return of stolen goods. If, for instance, I had a radio stolen from me, Mas would make a *matakau* along with a glass of water, both of which had been empowered by *mantera*. Both would be placed where the radio had been taken. Once a day for eight days, Mas would say a *mantera* over the water. If by the ninth day the radio was not returned, the thief would become sick and eventually die. If it was returned before the ninth day, the thief would have to seek out Mas for an antidote to the *matakau* curse. Mas would recite a different *mantera* over another glass of water that the thief would drink in order to recover and not die. If the thief remained errant and died, Mas would know it in his dreams when a shadowy human figure of the person appeared. On the ninth day, something must be done with the *matakau* object. It may be disassembled, the *matakau* water poured over it, and/or burned.

The *matakau* object that Mas showed us was a roughly 4-inch cylindrical piece of wood or part of a dried plant (Figure 2). It was spiked all over with what looked like pointy wooden toothpicks that propped the object up in a horizontal fashion. The entire object was wrapped loosely with a stiff, black thread. Mas explained that the cylindrical wood part was from the sago palm, specifically the *gabar* or stiff ribs of the palm, and symbolized humans. People eat sago and so, since we are what we eat, people in Maluku identify themselves with sago: they are sago people. Mas and his friend said that for the Javanese, the part of the *matakau* that represented humans would be made of rice, and they joked that for westerners it might be a potato! The spikes were made from bamboo, which symbolized the cause of wounds, bleeding, and pain. A common material for weapons because of its strength, flexibility, and sharpness, bamboo represents what cuts or breaks into a body through slashing or piercing with the intent to cause injury and possible death. By contrast, the black thread from the *enau* ‘sugar palm’ symbolized another form of harm: killing by strangulation. Tough and wiry, this smooth strong fiber can be used as a garrote, which quickly and efficiently suffocates victims to death by cutting off their oxygen and blood supply.

Figure 2. Bacanese *matakau* used to make thieves return stolen goods.

(Photo by L. Crowder, 1993)

Clearly, Mas's *matakau* object was intended to instill fear and the threat of pain and death to the person against whom it was directed. It was a manifestation of its meaning: *mata* 'eye' and *kau* 'red', in the sense of being "hot" or "dangerous" (Bartels 1977:73), which could be interpreted loosely as "menacing, potent eyes." This was the only kind of *matakau* object that Mas made. According to him, only the Moslems made this type of wooden *matakau*. The materials were always the same and were required to be obtained from the above three trees: sago palm, bamboo, and sugar palm. The object was always used with a *mantera*-empowered glass of water and with the purpose of returning objects already stolen rather than for prevention.

Mas also wore charms to protect his body. Around his waist was a red (for bravery) cloth belt that enveloped a piece of paper with writings (the *surat yaasin*) from the Koran. This paper was wrapped around a piece of tin (the only metal that could be used). Around his wrist was a *kambahar* bracelet of coral vines. The waist belt protection is for Moslems only, but the bracelet can be for anyone.

Pak A

Approximately twelve miles south of Labuha along the coast is the village of Panambuan. Like many villages on Bacan, it is simple, dusty, and unremarkable, except for a very modern fish processing plant situated on a nearby promontory. About a hundred yards away from the turn-off road to this promontory is a Protestant church. An elderly *dukun* named Pak A attends this church and serves as one of its deacons or lay leaders. At 73 years of age, he is a lively, kind, easygoing man who is eager to help others. At his concrete-floored and plaster-walled home around which children play and chickens wander freely, he receives visitors who seek his assistance in matters of fortune-telling, crime prevention, the restitution of lost or stolen goods, and the curing of spiritual or physical illness.

Pak received his knowledge and power from dreams during an early illness. In his dreams he talked to spirits who told him how to help people. He described these spirits as nice and beautiful, and as white people like the Portuguese. Pak, who was a Christian at the time, also saw angels and God in his dreams, all in human form.

Pak's mysterious illness began when he was 20 years old and lingered for six years, sometimes leading to stays in the hospital. Dutch doctors could not diagnose or cure him. Among the symptoms was an unexplainable paralysis of one of his legs. Eventually, he was sent home as a hopeless case. Soon afterward, he had a dream telling him to go to the forest to obtain the medicinal ingredients to treat his condition. In the forest he went for three days without food or water. It was during this time that a white book reminiscent of the Bible appeared to him and then disappeared. It is not clear whether this book was part of his dreams or not. Pak claims to have obtained all his mystical and medical knowledge from this book and from his dreams. However, he emphasizes that the Bible must be used, that the knowledge from the white book is not enough. The power comes from God, the knowledge from the book. It is God who moves and guides Pak to intuitively open to the appropriate page of the Bible, usually the Old Testament, for inspiration and prayer. Prayers are crucial for cures and for making *matakau*.

Pak learned about *matakau* in his dreams. All his *matakau* are the same: a bottle with a red ribbon tied around it that contains water and three small slices of ginger. He says a Christian prayer over it three times and then hangs it up. One *matakau* is good for all the things and property of one person. To protect produce and land up to ten square hectares, one or two *matakau* are needed. Land of more than ten hectares would require one

matakau for each corner of the property. *Matakau* protect animals, products, and property of the land, not things of the sea.

Pak's power can cause three types of *matakau* effects on thieves: (1) If *matakau* water is made after an object is stolen, it can be spilled out, compelling the thief to yell out, "I have stolen!" (2) If a *matakau* is made for protection before a crime has been committed and the *matakau* is placed in the house, then the perpetrator will become paralyzed. (3) If something protected by a *matakau* is stolen, the thief will itch all over and become sick. He will be able to recover only if the stolen object is returned, the owner is sought for forgiveness, and Pak is approached for a curative glass of water. This water is from the same *matakau* bottle that protected the object. Pak must say the same prayer over the water three times, then pour it over the offender's head. Only if this procedure is done will the thief recover. If nothing is done, then the thief's illness will eventually worsen and he may die.

Pak only makes *matakau* with the intent to make people sick, not to kill them. As the only *dukun* in Panambuan, his services are for all people and faiths, not just Christians. He does not charge for his services. When some people insist on giving him money, he donates it to the church. Often people will give him gifts such as sugar, chickens, or cigarettes. A variety of people, including the police and church officials, come to Pak for help. As I was leaving Pak during one visit, a Chinese storekeeper from Labuha came and waited to ask for Pak's help in recovering money and goods stolen from her store.

To find lost objects, Pak "reads" water that is in a bowl over which prayers have been said. Objects and people can also be seen in a mirror if the mirror is placed above water that has been prayed over. If a person steals and goes to another place, Pak can see and find that person in the mirror. Different prayers are said for different purposes. Another technique for recovering stolen objects is to build a fire in which *menyan*, an incense derived from gum benzoin, is used in the burning. A white cloth is waved over the fire and the thief's name is called out. The thief will then return the stolen goods on his own.

Menyan is also an important ingredient in the special medicines Pak makes himself. Said to be imported from Arabia, it is not expensive and is commonly available for purchase. Plants are used frequently in conjunction with water and prayer for medicinal purposes. In addition to common health ailments, Pak also treats leprosy and paralysis, and sets broken bones. He also uses massage with coconut oil as a treatment.

To have his work continue after him, Pak has apprenticed students to instruct them how to make *matakau*, to concoct medicines, and to heal. Having the knowledge does not give them the power. Pak gives them the power through water with prayer. The power derives from God through prayer, and can be manipulated and used for making hexes and black magic such as love potions. There are evil people who make *matakau*, but Pak does not know them since they are in other villages. Another aspect of Pak's power is his psychic ability. He knows that people are coming before they arrive, he "sees" other places, he is able to communicate telepathically with others, he receives messages and revelations in dreams, and he has the power to prevent a gun from firing if someone wants to shoot him. Pak is not afraid of losing his power. He has memorized the knowledge and it was implied that if his faith remains strong and his motives righteous, then he will continue to have the power from God.

Conclusion

Throughout Indonesia, there is a deep-rooted, prevalent cultural belief in the efficacy of magic and the mystical (Bartels 1979, Hanna 1967, Slaats and Portier 1989, Watson and Ellen 1993, and others). Bacan is no exception, so it is not surprising that *matakau* are widely used, and that *dukun* are legitimate figures. *Dukun* are officially acknowledged in the census, are consulted by local officials, and are recognized by the institutional, orthodox religions whose holy books are incorporated into their magic.

These two *dukun* provide an interesting comparison of styles, purposes and bases of authority. Both men have at once a quiet simplicity and a charismatic power that engenders trust and respect. Their materials are commonplace and methods simple. Both use water as the common operating medium or conductor of power to cure the victim or patient. Their mystery, however, lies in their unique areas of elaboration: for Mas, his various body charms and the visual complexity and drama of his fearful *matakau* makes him someone to be reckoned with; and for Pak, the multiple purposes and effects of his *matakau*, his different means (mirrors, fire, dreams, etc.) of psychic seeing, and his skill at making medications all give him a broader expanse of power and reputation.

Both men believe that it is their calling to serve and do not overtly charge for their services. Their expertise includes healing as well as the use of magic and *matakau* to protect property. Both Mas and Pak make only one type of *matakau*, although each is very different in style and appearance from the other. Although the *matakau* concerns property theft, Mas uses it

only for recovery, while Pak uses it for prevention as well as recovery. Both men are readily sought as the first line of help by those who seek to restore health or property.

In both cases, the orthodox religions of Islam and Christianity are acknowledged and integrated in the *dukun*'s magic. The Koran and Bible are included in the spells or prayers that make the *matakau* effective. Each *dukun* is active in his mosque or church, and local religious leaders in both cases do not hesitate to recommend their assistance. Whether the *dukun*'s special knowledge is acquired by teaching or inspired by a mystical experience, the power is acknowledged to be from Allah or God. This power itself is neutral and can be directed for either good or evil, depending on the moral nature of the wielder. The written word of holy books, especially when spoken with discrimination, seems to have its own inherent power as well. Both the Koran and the Bible were regarded by the *dukun* as having magical properties. In addition, dreams also play an important role as a source of mystical communication and information.

The environment of Bacan is especially favorable to using *matakau* and *dukun*. As stated earlier, the largely undeveloped, lush, open areas of the island have no fences to indicate boundaries or land custodianship. Since food plants grow in both wild or protected situations, the *matakau* warning communicates jurisdiction of what may appear to be open grange.

Throughout Indonesia, villages typically resolve their problems internally and avoid outside interference as much as possible (Geertz 1961). Regional officers and the courts are utilized only as a last resort when all local avenues of settling disputes have been exhausted. Families and friends may be asked to intervene to exert peer pressure; or the village head and wise elders may be consulted for advice and mediation. In many cases, the *dukun* is one of these elders (Hanna 1967). One means of influence at his disposal is the making of *matakau*. In a sense, this form of magic is an option of meting out justice that avoids the complications and uncertainty of the Jakarta governing system. Being at the outer fringe of the nation and much removed from the capital, Bacan is remote and underdeveloped, lacking a strong government presence. The few government agencies in residence there are associated with Jakarta and are viewed with apprehension as institutions of the non-Malukan "other."

Because of Bacan's relative isolation and its experience of being controlled by foreign intruders, the Bacan residents share with the rest of Maluku a strong regional identity that distinguishes them from the rest of Indonesia (Andaya 1993). Part of this regional identity is determined by

myths, the eating of sago, and the practice of traditional customs. For some, the preference of a *dukun* over a western doctor is an election of cultural heritage as much as it is a matter of familiarity and convenience. The *dukun* represents tradition, the ancestral legacy of special knowledge, and cultural self-empowerment. The western doctor symbolizes the outsider whose methods are part of an imposed system over which the average native feels he has never had any control or meaningful participation. In this regard, the doctor may connote the former European colonialism, alien rule by Jakarta, or the complications of contemporary globalism. By contrast, the traditional healer and his personal magic affirm the continued reliance on and respect for a cultural heritage that has survived outside challenges. The *dukun* today represents a syncretic belief system that is flexible and inclusive. It is a belief system that has proven its durability and relevance by having successfully incorporated traditional beliefs into the dominant religions of foreign invaders—Islam and Christianity. This syncretism persists as an independent form that at once preserves aspects of the traditional past while offering a viable alternative to the modern present.

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